

DVS chairman, Kevin Gilvary, answers some frequently asked questions.

What is the Shakespeare Authorship Question ?

The Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) raises the issue of who wrote the works traditionally ascribed to 'Shakespeare'. There are many reasons to doubt, which collectively indicate that there is a serious problem of attribution.

There was a man from Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, called William Shakspeare, to give the customary form of spelling his name. He was baptised on 26 April 1564 and was buried on the 25 April 1616. He bought property in both Stratford and in London and he was a sharer in a theatre company.

However, there is no record for any payment for any play of 'Shakespeare', no record of anyone who dealt with Will either as a poet or a playwright in his lifetime. Full-scale biographies of 'Shakespeare' only emerged two centuries after Will's death. These Victorian biographers freely filled in the extensive gaps in line with their view of a national poet with almost divine status. Their myths have been perpetuated ever since.

But surely nobody in Stratford ever doubted that Will wrote the works?

Quite true in that there is no record that anybody in Stratford ever expressed any doubt that Will wrote the great works of 'Shakespeare'. But there's a simple reason for that just as nobody ever expressed any doubts that Elvis Presley was the first man on the moon: nobody ever said that he was. There was no chance to express doubt about a proposition that was never made.

We need to recognise that in his last will and testament William of Stratford never claimed to have written anything. He mentioned no books, whether owned, borrowed or loaned out. He left no journals, no business papers, no letters claiming he was a writer. None of his family ever claimed that he was a poet and playwright. Nor did anybody else from Stratford for almost a century after his death. The reason that there was no expression of doubt is that there was no claim in the first place.

Don't we know that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare because his name is on the works?

Saying that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare is like saying that Mark Twain wrote the works of Mark Twain or George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss*. It is an empty tautology. The question concerns the identity of the author known as 'Shakespeare' and

by the way, the name of William Shakspere (as the family name appears in Stratford records) is not the same as William Shake-speare which appears on published works.

There are commendations in the First Folio (1623) written by Ben Jonson, but give no personal information about the author. Jonson was probably encouraged to write these at the behest of the publishers Edmund Blount and Isaac Jaggard. Elsewhere, he wrote literary puffs for which he was paid. And the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, who had supported the publication, were his benefactors. So, there's nothing in the commendation to show that Jonson knew the author personally.

Is the Shakespeare Authorship Question just a modern phenomenon?

Not at all. It is usually claimed that the first person to express doubts over the attribution of the plays to Will of Stratford was Delia Bacon in the 1850s. Interestingly, she was reacting against the earliest biographies which had just emerged, in which a romanticised life of the Bard was imagined. However, there were many occasions, over the two hundred years between the 1640s and 1850s when doubts were cast. Different modes and discourses were chosen to express these, and, on occasion, provide a cover of deniability. The fact that these doubts surfaced at intervals over a span of two centuries testifies to what we might call an 'underground stream' of doubt. Here are a few examples:

In 1645, *The Great Assizes Holden on Parnassus by Apollo and his Assessors* describes a mock trial of contemporary authors. On the second page, the writer of weekly accounts is identified as 'William Shakespeare'. At the end of the trial, Apollo condemned him to pass back and forward over the river Styx as a go-between, a fixer, a dealer. In 1728, a Captain Goulding wrote *An Essay Against Too Much Reading* to satirise incipient bardolatry and suggest the works were the result of proxy authorship. In 1827 the author of Tremaine (Robert Plumer Ward) wrote *De Vere or the Man of Independence*. The title page brings together De Vere, Shakespeare, and Francis Bacon and almost every one of the 26 chapters is headed by a quote from Shakespeare. In 1852, Robert Jamieson posed the question WHO WROTE SHAKSPEARE? in an essay in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*. These examples are explored by Julia Cleave in her article under DVS Research entitled [Early Doubters of Shakespeare's Identity](#).

Much of this has also been described by Charlton Ogburn in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. The trail leads back into the 17th and even the 16th centuries, with numerous literary allusions to the pseudonymous character of the name 'Shakespeare' and to Oxford's acknowledged status as a writer of pseudonymous comedies and other "rare devices of poetry." In 1610 John Davies refers to Shakespeare as "Our English

Terence,” alluding to the well-known renaissance belief that Terence was actually the front man for the aristocratic Roman comedian, Scipio.

Why bother with the author when we have the works?

Credit where credit's due. Firstly, we should recognise and honor the true author of the works and restore a sense of authenticity and truth to the work we study and enjoy under the name 'Shakespeare'.

Then we can note that literary biography provides insight into the meaning and significance of a text. So attaching the wrong author's name and life to the work leads to a host of false assumptions which in turn spawn further misperceptions of the work. Acknowledging Oxford's authorship restores, among other things, the political dimensions of his works which the Stratford story obscures. Like Hamlet himself, Shakespeare conceived drama and its players as being the “abstract and brief chronicles” of the time.” No one seriously questions, for example, that John Lyly's *Endymion* (circa. 1584) depends on parallels between characters in play and major figures in the Elizabethan court. An awareness of the parallel between Lyly's main female character Cynthia and the Virgin Queen is a prerequisite to appreciating the play. The great poets of the Elizabethan period such as Edmund Spenser, routinely disguised their more incendiary comments in metaphors or allegories. Such writers published works commenting, often in cleverly oblique ways, on controversial current events which could not be treated more directly under the Tudor court's regime of strict censorship.

Third, acknowledging Oxford's authorship radically transforms our understanding of politics, propaganda and history. After all, if you take Oxford as the author, then a vast contemporary backdrop falls into place, and one apprehends a whole new dimension to the plays: that of political satire. *Hamlet* for instance becomes an intriguing expose of court life under Elizabeth (written by the Hamlet of Elizabeth's Court) which provides us with innumerable valuable insights into the private Court history of the time. The value of this extra dimension for actors and directors is difficult to overestimate. After all, an actor playing Polonius in *Hamlet* can gain enormous psychological insight into his character by reading up about the historical original, William Cecil, Lord Burghley.

Finally, the topic is of interest from the point of view of intellectual history. Does it matter that for more than two hundred years students have been memorizing a point of view which now seems, to an increasing number of informed scholars, to have been false? It would certainly seem so!

Aren't Authorship sceptics just anti-Shakespeare?

No we are not anti-Shakespeare. We greatly admire and appreciate the works of Shakespeare and strongly recommend them to others. We are non-Stratfordians in that we believe that it is very unlikely that the works were written by William of Stratford. Of course, if it could readily be proved that he had written the plays and poems that would be an end of the matter. But there is no contemporary record which indicates his status as an author; and this is what is so extraordinary; there is very little evidence - and what little there is casts even more doubt on his authorship.

Aren't Authorship sceptics just conspiracy theorists?

The term 'conspiracy theorist' seems to be used to denigrate a view before it's been examined. Members of the De Vere Society and other authorship sceptics share a great interest in the works of Shakespeare and a desire to identify and honour the person(s) who wrote them. Just as with Mary Westmancott and Robert Galbraith, we believe that the name 'Shakespeare' involves the use of a pseudonym, not a conspiracy.

Aren't authorship sceptics just snobs?

It is often asserted that authorship sceptics are just snobs who can't accept that someone from a modest provincial background can have written the works. The answer to this is simple: no thank you, we are not.

We note that contemporary writers such as Edmund Spenser (1553-1599), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593?) and Ben Jonson (1573-1637) came from modest backgrounds and composed some great works of literature. But in each case, there is considerable contemporary evidence, a 'paper trail,' about their literary activity. In the case of William of Stratford, there are no contemporary records to suggest that he was any kind of author. The authorship question asks not who could have written the plays, but who did. Everything about the Shakespearean canon, as observers like Charlie Chaplin and Mark Twain have noted, suggests an author of an aristocratic background and bias. Almost all the plays portray kings and nobles as their protagonists. One play which doesn't was nevertheless set near a great royal castle and depicts a pageant, where the Queen of the Fairies gives an extensive description of an important royal ceremony. If William of Stratford was writing a play about the gulling of a fat knight, it was more likely to have been called *The Merry Wives of Wilmcote* than the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Can't everything be explained by genius?

'Shakespeare' was most certainly a genius and authorship sceptics agree that 'Shakespeare' had supreme natural talents. However, in explaining how an artist came to produce outstanding works of art, genius alone is not an explanation. We insist that

the talents of a genius have to be recognised and advanced from an early age; that knowledge had to be acquired, that skills had to be developed, that dramatic techniques had to be practised. Michelangelo's talents as a painter and as a sculptor were appreciated at an early age and so he was apprenticed to a master who was working on frescoes at the Sistine Chapel. There Michelangelo studied classical sculpture, a necessary prerequisite for his 'David'. Mozart's genius was recognised at an early age: he began performing publicly by the age of five or six and he was taught intensively. He also studied the works of Handel before he could emulate and surpass them.

In the case of William, there is neither any record of early promise nor any suggestion that he was introduced to a wide range of classical and renaissance literature from an early age. There is no record that he ever attended school either in Stratford nor anywhere else, nor that he was ever noticed when he was young. In the case of 'Shakespeare', nobody seemed to notice him until works began to be published under this name from 1593.

If not William of Stratford, then who wrote the plays?

There have been various suggestions as to the true identity of the concealed author: among them Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Mary Sidney and Henry Neville. We respect all of these researchers and clearly share the common idea that 'Shakespeare' was a pseudonym. While a reasonable case can be made for these candidates, we believe that by far the best candidate is Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604).

Oxford's claim was first made by a schoolteacher John Thomas Looney in 1920 in his book *Shakespeare Identified*. This publication gradually gained support among intellectuals of the time: Sigmund Freud, the actor/director Leslie Howard, and the novelist John Galsworthy. In 1984, Charlton Ogburn published a monumental study, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* which deals with many aspects of the SAQ and Oxford's claim. Today, Shakespeare lovers are increasingly aware of the authorship question while Oxford's claim has been made compellingly by Mark Anderson in *Shakespeare By Another Name* (2005).

What evidence is there that Oxford was a poet and a playwright?

Early references to Oxford's literary activities are also abundant and compelling in their effect. In the 1580s, William Webbe (*Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586) referred to Oxford as deserving the "title of most excellent" among Elizabethan court poets. The anonymous author of *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), in writing of those "noble Gentlemen in the court that have written commendably well and suppressed it agayne, or else suffered it to be publisht without their own names to it", and then referring later

in the same work to those whose writing would be seen as [excellent] “if their doings could be found out and made publicke with the rest, of which number is first that noble Gentleman, Edward Earle of Oxford”, clearly provides significant evidence of Oxford’s status as one of several anonymous and pseudonymous Court writers of the 1580s. Also Later, in 1598, Frances Meres lists Oxford as the “best for Comedy among us” in *Palladis Tamia*. Henry Peacham lists Oxford first among the greatest Elizabethan poets in *The Compleat Gentleman*. This work was published in 1622 when the First Folio of ‘Shakespeare’ was nearly finished. Yet Peacham does not mention Shakespeare at all. For more information, read Peter Dickson’s article at

<http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/oxfords-literary-reputation/>

Why should the author use a pseudonym?

We are not sure as there is no contemporary documentation. We know of many writers have used a pen name, although we cannot be sure that they give the true explanation. It is likely that many others did so without ever revealing their names. Witness the dispute as to whether Truman Capote wrote or revised Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the Elizabethan period, poets such as Edmund Spenser published under a false name. The polemical Mar-prelate tracts also concealed the identity of the author. In 1596, Sir John Harington published *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* under the pseudonym of Misacmos as he made unfavourable allusions to the Earl of Leicester.

Many Oxfordians believe that there was no secret about Oxford’s authorship of comedies performed at court in the late 1570s and early 1580s. Some plays, perhaps an early version of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, were intended for performance among aristocrats with no intention of showing it to the court since they contained unfavourable satires of Elizabeth. But Elizabeth and her Secretary, Lord Burghley, needed Oxford’s dramatic talent to forge a sense of national consciousness through the history plays. Thus during the 1580s, when England was threatened by the Catholic League, led by the Spanish Armada, ‘Shakespeare’ loyally presented English history on stage in plays such as *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and the anti-Catholic *Troublesome Raigne of King John*. According to this view, the identity of ‘Shakespeare’ was a state secret, not a conspiracy. De Vere’s intimate and conflicted relations with powerful persons such as William Cecil, Elizabeth I, and later James I often resulted in an ambiguous portrait of power and authority. After his death, the pseudonym stuck as it was needed to sell the works in print. Who now would pay to watch a film starring Norma Jean Baker (née Mortenson), or attend a pop concert by Gordon Sumner, or buy a spy novel by David Cornwell?

What about the plays written after Oxford's death in 1604?

Contrary to popular belief, there is no contemporary document to date any play of 'Shakespeare'. Neither records of performance nor of publication indicate when any play was composed (or when or whether it was revised). We can note that by the time of William's death in 1616, 18 plays in the First Folio had yet to be published. On the assumption that William began writing plays when aged 26, a possible chronology has been accepted stretching from 1590 until 1610 or so. However, some Stratfordian scholars believe that he was an 'early starter' and thus date his first plays to 1586 or so. Since there is a wide range of possible dates for the composition (and revision of plays), topical allusions remain conjectural.

The year of Oxford's death in 1604 is an interesting turning point in the publication of quartos of 'Shakespeare'. In the six years preceding, twelve plays appeared in print attributed to 'Shakespeare' and two others appeared for the first time but without attribution (*Romeo & Juliet*, *Henry V*). By contrast, in the following twelve years until the death of William of Stratford, only three new plays appeared in print.

Oxford can't have written the plays because he was a misogynist and treated his wife badly.

Some (but not all) geniuses were less than pleasant people in their private lives. John Lennon wrote the most moving love songs but admitted to being chauvinistic and even physically abusive. Beethoven and Wagner were very difficult to get on with while Picasso had a string of mistresses. Yet their private lives have not been seen as a bar to recognition of their talents. Anyone who claims that a misogynist cannot have written the works of 'Shakespeare' has obviously not read *Othello* or *The Taming of the Shrew* or seen the actions of Bertram in *All's Well*.

The suggestion that Oxford was a misogynist and was cruel to his wife rests on slender evidence. In fact, Oxford was much maligned during his life, mainly for his wife's apparent infidelity. He was on his continental tour in 1575, when his wife, Anne (née Cecil) bore a daughter, the Lady Elizabeth Vere. Rumour spread that Oxford had been cuckolded (a familiar Shakespearean theme). Upon his return to England in 1576, Oxford refused to recognise either his wife or her daughter. During this time, he fathered a son by one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting. Eventually, he was reconciled with his countess by the stratagem of a bed trick (sounds familiar). After Anne died in 1588, he remarried Elizabeth Trentham. While Oxford may not have been the perfect husband, there is no evidence for the kind of idyllic relationship frequently attributed to

William of Stratford. More importantly, Oxford's treatment of women is no worse than the behaviour of many others and does not invalidate his claim as author of the works.

Will we still use the name 'Shakespeare' even after the real author is identified?

Without being able to look into the seeds of time, it is difficult to say. But in my opinion, the name 'Shakespeare' is likely to continue in use. After all, nobody refers to the works of Charles Dodgson or David Agnew.

How can I keep in touch with developments in the SAQ?

Three easy steps:

1. Join the De Vere Society;
2. Read the quarterly newsletters;
3. Discuss the SAQ with other members at DVS events.

You can find a wealth of useful material on the website of our sister organisation in North America, the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, at <http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org>

Don't forget the Shakespeare Authorship Trust
<http://www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk/>

And make sure you sign the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt at <https://doubtaboutwill.org/declaration>